Email response from Geography and Map Division, Library of Congress

Ticket #18582355 · Reference Librarian Reply · June 30, 2026

SUGGESTED CITATION

GENERAL

Email response from Geography and Map Division, Library of Congress (Ticket #18582355, June 30, 2026).

APA (7TH ED.)

Mattson, L. (2026, June 30). *Re: Research project comparing historical maps with current satellite imagery* [Personal reference correspondence]. Ask a Librarian, Geography and Map Division, Library of Congress. Ticket #18582355.

MLA (9TH ED.)

Mattson, Lena. "Re: Research Project Comparing Historical Maps with Current Satellite Imagery." Received by [researcher's name], 30 June 2026. Ask a Librarian, Geography and Map Division, Library of Congress, Ticket #18582355.

CHICAGO (AUTHOR-DATE)

Mattson, Lena. 2026. Email message to author. June 30. Ask a Librarian, Geography and Map Division, Library of Congress, Ticket #18582355.

FROM	Lena Mattson, Reference Librarian — Geography and Map Division, Library of Congress
SERVICE	Ask a Librarian (maps@ask.loc.gov)
SUBJECT	[Geography and Map Division] Research project comparing historical maps with current satellite imagery and map views
TICKET ID	#18582355
ORIGINAL QUESTION SENT	June 29, 2026, 2:02 PM
REPLY SENT	June 30, 2026, 9:20 AM
RECORD TYPE	Personal correspondence (institutional email reply); not a published Library of Congress policy statement

REFERENCE LIBRARIAN REPLY — JUN 30, 2026 · 09:20 AM

Dear Vinh,

The Library of Congress does not have an official stance on this, and I am not speaking for the Library, but I will give you my opinion as a reference librarian: I would highly discourage you from using Google Maps for this project or other research projects involving historical-map-to-modern-map overlays or side-by-side comparisons. For one thing, it's a proprietary product so you will almost certainly be in violation of not only copyright but also of their terms of use if you're using screenshots without a prior (paid) agreement. It's not something they can come after you for if it's just personal use on your own computer, but if this is a research project you want to distribute one day for others to see, that will be a problem. Also, to your point, it's a commercial product, so "clean" maps are not the point. Google Maps is certainly a very useful tool in day-to-day life but its purpose is to point you to businesses and other features that they make money from showing you, not to give you a clean background base map.

For people who do this work professionally, the typical process is to use OpenStreetMap as their base layer. It's easy to use and the license is open for almost anything you could want to do with it. By extension, there is a well-known open tool called Leaflet that works with OpenStreetMap and many other map providers, and it essentially creates a small map for you on demand with minimal input. Leaflet's website has tutorials, as does OpenStreetMap's wiki. The Library does not provide training to the public on mapmaking, so that's all I can give you, but you can find a lot of instruction on YouTube, through online classes, and through local universities with geography programs if that's an option for you.

Feel free to write back if you have further questions about the maps in our collections.

Best regards,
Lena Mattson

Reference Librarian, Geography and Map Division
Library of Congress

ORIGINAL QUESTION (REQUESTER) JUN 29, 2026 · 02:02 PM

Hello, I'm preparing a research project that compares historical maps from the Library of Congress with current satellite imagery and map views from Google Maps.

For the Library of Congress collections, downloading and citing maps is straightforward. However, I'm having difficulty obtaining clean, high-resolution reference images from Google Maps for side-by-side comparison in my notes.

I've experimented with browser screenshots and also tried a small utility called DownloadMapImage.com, which captures clean map images without browser UI, but I'm wondering whether there are any recommended practices or publicly available guidance for researchers who need Google Maps images strictly for reference and comparison purposes.

Does the Library of Congress have any recommendations or resources about combining historical maps with modern mapping services while respecting copyright and attribution requirements?

Thank you.

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